2

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ON PAGE 1

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Syria's Leader Rules by Arms—and Conciliation

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ALEPPO, Syria—In the ancient cities of northern Syria, especially among the freewheeling merchants of the bazaar, an overriding sense of independence has endured for thousands of years.

Against this tradition rubs that authoritarian socialism of President Hafez Assad, who with almost 10 years in office is the longest-lasting of a series of Syrian military leaders.

The independence of cities like Aleppo, Hama and Homs has not meshed easily with the central government in Damasus and the peculiar mixture of socialism, authoritarianism and Islam that it has pressed on the north.

A month ago, the sparks of discontent flashed in Aleppo and Homs. They exploded into riots that took as many as 150 lives and shock Assad's regime so severely that many Middle East politicians, including Egypt's Anwar Sadat, predicted that he would soon fall in a popular revolution.

Diplomatic observers here now doubt it, however, and a trip through the north showed that life has generally returned to a placid pace. But order was restored only through Assad's conciliatory gestures to opponents of his regime and the imposition of tough security measures.

Signs of tension remain in Aleppo. Islamic poster, flags and banners were strung across many streets of the ancient city recently, a subtle form of protest by Syria's majority Sunni Muslims against the leadership role of Assad's minority Alawite Muslims. (The Alawites are believed to make up less than 10% of the Syrian population.)

On the outskirts of Aleppo stands the bivouac of the 3rd Army Division, including many soldiers who learned urban warfare while serving with the Syrian security force in Beirut. Throughout the towns of northern Syria and on desert roads to the east, heavily armed soldiers and plainclothesman continue to halt and search cars and buses looking for terrorists and weapons.

As firm control of the military and security forces.

In assessing the causes of trouble, Western observers cite three major problems of the Assad regime.

—Attempts by Assad's ruling Baath Party to impose a socialist economy, including rigid price controls that sought to put an end to traditional bargaining in the bazaars, have been unpopular in Syria's large and traditionally free commercial sector, encompassing about a quarter of the country's people.

—Assad's austere form of socialist idealism, which has suppressed what he calls the feudal and capitalistic class with land and business takeover, has been accompanied by extraordinary corruption that has created an equally large class of new, politically favored millionaires.

—Assad is an Alawite Muslim, a member of what most Syrians view as a heretical offshoot of Shia Islam. Under Assad, the minority Alawites hold all key government and military jobs. While the majority Sunnis participate, they do not control.

In addition, the Assad regime has antagonized students by dismissing and in many cases imprisoning teachers who are considered unreliable. It has also gained enemies by forcing all Syrian students to undergo Baath Party indoctrination as a routine part of every day's classes.

Inflation and a host of other everyday living problems have added heat to the fire that has been building in Syria during a total of 19 years of Baathist rule.

The result has been a growing and increasingly popular movement against the regime.

Not all of Assad's opponents want to see him overthrown, however. Many merely seek reforms to make more palatable the kind of government they believe they must go on living with. And Assad's latest moves, designed to mollify this seemingly moderate but not altogether silent majority, have probably given him breathing space.

Diplomatic observers here say that despite continuing internal unrest, including sporadic assassinations and bombings that have kept troops on alert throughout Syria, there is no immediate danger of Assad's collapse.

Tough military security measures coupled with the conciliatory gestures to his opponents—including a Cabinet shake-up and the replacement of many Alawite profiteers who held government jobs—helped calm last month's civil disorder.

The new governor in Aleppo, a popular former city judge whom Assad appointed to appease protesters who had said that the previous governor was corrupt, moves about the city without bodyguards, an unusual show of confidence for any Syrian official. A sprinkling of foreign tourists have returned after several weeks in which Aleppo was off-limits. They prowl the crowded streets of what residents proudly proclaim the world's oldest continuously inhabited city.

Business activity, which had come to a standstill during the violence, was mostly back to normal, although some government shops had been burned by rioters.

Military loyalty determines ultimate power, most analysts agree, and on that score Assad is given good prospects for survival.

"There have been occasional reports of sectarian rivalry between Sunnis and Alawites in the military," a longtime western observer said, "but they've been isolated. Sunni officers resent the favoritism shown to Alawites, but they are powerless to do anything about it because Assad's loyal Alawites control all the elite units and hold the sensitive jobs. It would be hard for any group of Sunni officers to or-

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